

August 31, 2012 | [Azizah al-Hibri](#) and [Robert P. George](#) , Commissioners

For Muslim Americans and other concerned citizens across the nation, news of still more violence against the largely Muslim Rohingya of Burma highlights the plight of one of the world's most persecuted communities and the need for a global response. The latest bloodshed, coupled with two prior months of riots and murders, has left more than 700 dead and 80,000 homeless. This violence has been compounded by the behavior of the Burmese security forces who, according to major human rights organizations, have participated in killings and rapes as well as mass arrests against the Rohingya.

Despite recent democratic reforms, Burma's new civilian government has failed to reverse decades of anti-Rohingya discrimination, including denial of citizenship. As a result, Rohingyas face severe religious freedom restrictions, including limits on the number of Muslim marriage ceremonies in certain villages. Authorities routinely deny them permits to build mosques and often destroy mosques and schools for lacking permits. The military offers charity, bribes, and promises of jobs or schooling for Muslim children converting to Buddhism.

This alarming state of affairs reveals how much farther Burma's new government must go in advancing reform and protecting human rights, including religious freedom. Until improvements occur, the United States should maintain economic and political sanctions, including its designating Burma as a "country of particular concern" for severe religious freedom abuses.

We recognize Burma's recent changes and the positive political opening they promise. Yet in the face of massive violations of human rights, and in particular the right to religious freedom, we must address the plight of the Rohingya. Public condemnations and food aid, while necessary, are insufficient when Burma's 800,000 Rohingya remain stateless and vulnerable. Moreover, Burma's experiment in democratic change will surely fail if it excludes the Rohingya and other ethnic and religious minorities.

At least three factors contributed to the crisis confronting Rohingya Muslims.

- First, anti-Rohingya animus runs deep. Many Burmese view the Rohingya as an unwelcome foreign presence that the British foisted on Burma in the 19th century. Unfortunately, even Nobel laureate Aun San Suu Kyi stopped short of publicly endorsing Rohingya citizenship.

- Second, Burma has a history of severe religious freedom violations, especially against non-Buddhist ethnic minorities, including both Muslims and many Christians among the Chin, Naga, Karen, and Karenni ethnic minorities.

- Finally, Burma's military governments for decades maintained power through a divide-and-conquer strategy which pitted Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims against each other, and ethnic Rakhine against their Rohingya neighbors. Reflecting this strategy, Burma's

military in 1982 stripped the Rohingya of citizenship, and subsequently let violence, discrimination, and human rights abuses occur with impunity.

The mistreatment of the Rohingya should arouse the world's conscience. Besides the ongoing anti-Rohingya violence inside Burma, at least 350,000 Muslim Rohingya languish in refugee camps in Bangladesh, Malaysia, and other Southeast Asian nations.

The new government's treatment of the Rohingya serves as a bellwether for its treatment of other ethnic and religious minorities. Under military rule, Burma was one of the world's worst human rights and religious freedom violators. Under civilian rule, it has yet to put that image behind it and fully affirm its ethnic and religious diversity by upholding human rights, including religious freedom, for everyone.

So how can we help the Rohingya?

The international community should speak out against anti-Rohingya violence and encourage Burma to increase the Rohingya's protection. The United States and the UN have spoken out recently, as have countries like Indonesia, Turkey and Pakistan. This emerging coalition must support immediate security measures and a durable solution for the Rohingya in Burma and throughout Southeast Asia.

Further, the United States and world community must keep challenging Burma to embrace democracy and freedom. There must be coordinated efforts to convince Burma's new government that protecting religious and ethnic minorities is not only the humanitarian thing to do, but is vital to security and prosperity.

If Burma wants a free and prosperous tomorrow, it must uphold the rights of all of its people -- Rohingya included -- today.

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